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ABSTRACT

Young children's atttitudes about marriage and divorce, considered as social institutions and as personal possibilities, were investigated. Subjects were 119 children in kindergarten and second and fourth grades who lived with nondivorced parents, single divorced mothers, or remarried mothers. In reference to a story line illustrated with paper dolls, children were asked open- and close-ended questions on five themes: (1) marriage; (2) divorce of a couple without children; (3) divorce of a couple with two young children; (4) remarriage; and (5) stepparents. While most subjects expected to marry and believed that marriage is a positive experience, the children were surprisingly accepting of divorce as a solution to an unhappy marriage, even in cases involving young children. However, children with divorced parents were more likely than children with still-married parents to view divorce as a possibility for themselves. Kindergarteners were more likely than older subjects to hold negative attitudes toward divorce. (RH)

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"Why Stay Married if You're Unhappy Being Married": Children's Attitudes Towards Marriage and Divorce

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Paper presented at the Conference on Human Development, Richmond, Virginia, March 1990.

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ABSTRACT

The usual approach to investigating children's ideas about marriage and divorce is to ask children what they think about their parents' divorce and from their answers to calculate "divorce adjustment". This study, instead, asks,

1) What are children's attitudes towards marriage and divorce?,
2) Do children subscribe to the myth of the traditional, happy marriage?, and
3) Do children with divorced parents see divorce as a more viable option than children with still-married parents?

Subjects were 119 children in kindergarten, second, and fourth grade living with nondivorced parents, single divorced mothers, or remarried mothers. In reference to a story line illustrated with paper dolls, children were asked questions about marriage and divorce, as social institutions and as possibilities for themselves. While most subjects expected to marry and believed that marriage is a positive experience, the children were surprisingly accepting of divorce as a solution to an unhappy marriage, even a marriage with young children. However, children with divorced parents were more likely than children with still-married parents to view divorce as a possibility for themselves. Kindergarteners were more likely than older subjects to hold negative attitudes towards divorce.

BACKGROUND

Although a few studies have measured children's attitudes towards marriage and divorce, it is difficult to conclude from those studies how children of different ages and from different family backgrounds reason about these family issues. The usual approach to investigating children's ideas about marriage and divorce is to ask children what they think about their parents' divorce, and from these answers to calculate their "divorce adjustment." This study, instead, conceives of children's attitudes about marriage and divorce as a domain of social knowledge that is important in its own right. Because many Americans have been affected, directly or vicariously, by the process and the consequences of divorce, the development of children's attitudes toward marriage and divorce is likely to involve a dynamic interaction between individual development and social change.

Measuring children's attitudes towards marriage and divorce has been used as a way to study intergenerational transmission of divorce. The possibility that family problems in the parents' generation facilitate marital instability in the younger one is often referred to as the "transmission hypothesis." According to this theory, as a result of personal experience, a child with divorced parents may view divorce as a more viable option to end an unhappy marriage than a child with nondivorced parents.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Subjects were 119 children (ages 5 years 1 month to 10 years 5 months) in kindergarten (n = 33), second (n = 45), and fourth grade (n = 41). One group (n = 87) lived with nondivorced, still-married parents. Children with divorced parents (n = 32) lived either with single divorced mothers (n = 22) or with remarried mothers and stepfathers in a suburban, midwestern community (n = 10). All subjects were white and middle-class, and were students at 4 public elementary schools, where they were interviewed individually.

TASK

In reference to a story line illustrated with paper dolls, children were asked both open and close-ended questions about 5 themes - marriage, divorce of a couple without children, divorce of couple with 2 young children, remarriage, and stepparents.

The questions were derived from studies of children with divorced parents that used open-ended interviews or questionnaires, especially research published by Lawrence Kurdek and by Judith Wallerstein. Some questions and the format of the interview were developed specifically for this study, and the interview was pilot tested to assure that all questions were age-appropriate.

Transcripts of the interviews were coded by two undergraduates blind to the hypotheses of the study and to the subjects' age, grade, and parents' marital status. Interrater reliability for exact agreement averaged 91% across all attitude questions.

THE INTERVIEW

The story line introduces the children to two paper dolls, Sue and Andy. Generally, each theme begins with information about Sue and Andy, then a question about them, then a question about the subject. For instance, the interviewer begins:

> I'd like to show you some dolls. This one is Sue and this one is Andy. They're married to each other. What does that mean, to say that they're married?
>
> Why do you think Sue and Andy got married?
>
> Can you think of any other reasons why people get married?
>
> Do you think you'll ever get married?
>
> Why is that?

During the course of the interview, the subject meets the dolls Bob and Jill, who are both single. Eventually, Sue and Andy are described as "unhappy being married", and they decide to divorce. Later, the interviewer introduces the subject to the couple's two children, a boy and a girl, and many of the questions asked earlier about divorce are repeated. Sue and Andy each remarry so that the subjects can talk about remarriage and, then, stepparents for the children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. To the question, "Do you think you might ever get divorced from your husband or wife?", children from divorced families more frequently responded "yes" than children with still-married parents, χ^2 = (3, N = 119) = 7.97, $p<.05$.

Children with divorced parents also were more likely to provide an example to the question, "Can you think of something that might make you feel you had to have a divorce from your husband/wife?", χ^2 = (2, N = 104) = 5.94, p =.05.

2. The overall trend, in response to a question posed about the dolls, was that subjects from both married and divorced families were surprisingly accepting of divorce as a solution to an unhappy marriage (73%), even a marriage with young children (62%).

Almost half (48%) of the children explained this advice with responses such as "Why should they married if they're unhappy being married?" or "because you want them to be happy."

There were also strong age differences in response to these two questions. Significantly more kindergarteners than second and fourth-graders stated that Sue and Andy should stay married rather than get divorced (see Table).

3. The children's tendency to advocate divorce is especially interesting in light of their responses to two other questions. To the first, "When people are divorced, is it mainly good or is it mainly bad?", only 20% of the children answered mainly good. (There were no age or marital status differences). Thus, the majority of children are advising divorce to the dolls and consider it a possibility for themselves, even though they see it as mainly bad.

After the dolls Sue and Andy get divorced, the interviewer asks, "For Sue to raise her two children by herself, is it mainly easy or is it mainly hard?". Ninety-two percent (92%) of the children stated it was mainly hard. Kindergarteners were more likely than 2nd and 4th graders to say that it was easy, χ^2 (4, N = 118) = 10.87, $p<.05$.

4. Older children were significantly more likely to provide an example of when it's okay to get a divorce (*see Table*). For instance, they might say, "If we had a big, big fight," or "when you've had enough of being together."

Given these subjects' acceptance of divorce both for themselves and as a solution to an unhappy marriage, is marriage still a romantic ideal for them?

5. 77% of the children think they will get married (10% said no, 13% "I don't know").

The sole gender difference in marriage and divorce attitudes appeared in fourth-graders in response to this question. In this grade, girls were significantly more likely than boys to think that they will marry, χ^2, (2, N = 41) = 8.80, $p<.02$.

6. In response to the question, "When people are married, is it mainly good or is it mainly bad?", 85% of the sample replied that marriage is mainly good.

7. The paradox, however, is that the children did not buy the myth of "and they lived happily ever after" (*see Table*). As before, significantly more younger children than older ones believed in "happily ever after." Thus, it seems that marriage remains desirable to children, even though it falls short of the romantic ideal.

CONCLUSION

These results suggest that psychologists' assessment of the impact of divorce on children from different family backgrounds will be complicated by the prevalence of divorce in the United States. Children, not only those whose parents have divorced, see families all around them falling apart. While the majority of 5 to 10-year-old subjects in this study expect to marry and believe that marriage, overall, is a positive experience, to these children being married does not mean living happily ever after, and divorce is seen as a logical solution to an unhappy marriage.

That children from divorced families were more likely to view divorce as a possibility for themselves does suggest a disinhibitory effect of parental divorce that is consistent with the transmission hypothesis.

The data also suggest that there is a shift in children's attitudes towards divorce between kindergarten and second grade. It is likely that developmental changes in children's social-cognitive abilities influence children's ability to reason about marriage and divorce, allowing older children to appreciate to some extent the dynamics of family relationships.

If Sue and Andy are unhappy being married,
should they stay married or should they get divorced?

GRADE	% of subjects who respond: STAY MARRIED	GET DIVORCED	DEPENDS
Kindergarten:			
No children	50	47	0
Children	52	42	0
2nd Grade:			
No children	14	81	5
Children	29	69	0
4th Grade:			
No children	10	83	8
Children	22	61	12

X^2 (6, N = 115) = 24, p = .006 - no children
X^2 (6, N = 119) = 18, p = .007 - w/ 2 children

When do you think it's okay to get a divorce?

GRADE	% EXAMPLE	% NEVER	% I DON'T KNOW
All Subjects	67	9	23
Kinder.	52	0	44
2nd Grade	64	19	17
4th Grade	82	5	11

X^2 (8, N = 107) = 25, p = .003

Do you think that their (Sue and Andy) being married means they'll live happily ever after?

GRADE	% YES	% NO	% DEPEND	% I DON'T KNOW
All Subjects	28	52	19	2
Kindergarten	59	31	6	3
2nd Grade	22	58	20	0
4th Grade	10	61	27	2

13 $X^2(6, N = 118) = 26, p<.001$